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APOLOGETICA AND HISTORICA:

SOME ORTHODOX CONSIDERATIONS ON THE THESIS OF “THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS”

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Keywords:

History of Religions, Civilizations, Interreligious Dialogue, Orthodox Perspective, Orthodox Theology

Abstract:

Nowadays, in the context of the growing migration of the Muslim population in Europe, caused by the wars in different areas, the question is increasingly being asked whether there is a danger of “Islamization of Europe” following “the clash of civilizations”. The last formula is not new. It created a real dispute in the past. But the discussions must also take into account other questions that are currently being asked: is there still a Christian Europe? Is it possible to speak of an intrinsic conflict between Christianity and Islam, which erupts at certain periods of time?

In this study I focused on the topic of “the clash of civilizations”, the impact that this formula had in the world at the end of the twentieth century and the connotations it has for our times. The topic of research starts from the realities that no one can dispute, globally emphasizing the problems that affect people: conflicts in various territories, difficult economic situations in certain regions of the world, reaching financial crises and important social changes, in which the majority populations have to live with minorities that, most of the time, they do not know and do not accept.

Introduction

Nowadays, in the context of the increasing migration of the Muslim population to Europe due to wars in various regions around the world that have led to economic and humanitarian crises, there are individuals who

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increasingly question whether there is a danger of the “Islamization of Europe” as a result of “the clash of civilizations”. This expression is not new; it has sparked genuine controversies in the past. However, discussions also raise other questions that are pertinent today: Can we still speak of a Christian Europe? Is there an intrinsic conflict between Christianity and Islam that erupts at certain times? How should the Christian world respond to these challenges it faces today, of which migration is but one – perhaps the most publicized – but not the only one?²

In this study, we will focus on the theme of “the clash of civilizations”,³ the impact this formulation had on the world at the end of the 20th century, and its connotations for our times. The relevance of this research arises from realities that can no longer be contested at the global level, highlighting problems affecting people: conflicts in various regions, difficult economic situations in certain parts of the world, leading to financial crises and significant social changes, where majority populations live alongside minorities that, more often than not, they do not know, do not understand, and do not accept. The demographics of the world have radically changed, influencing perceptions of people belonging to different religions, cultures, and ethnicities with which they come into repeated contact. The issue of refugees and migrants is a major global concern, prompting societies today to modify their structures from many perspectives. It is becoming increasingly difficult to talk about a Christian, Muslim, Hindu world, etc., but rather about pluralistic societies, such that “the map of the world in which we live cannot be colour-coded as to its Christian, Muslim or Hindu identity, but each part of the world is marbled with the colors and textures of the whole”.⁴

From these realities, the theory of the “clash of civilizations” has crystallized, sparking lengthy discussions and dividing the world between supporters and opponents.

² See in this way: Rev. Asoc. Prof. ADRIAN BOLDIȘOR, PhD, “Impactul fenomenului migrației asupra dialogului interreligios. Perspectivă ortodoxă”, in: *Mitropolia Olteniei*, no. 9-12/2019, pp. 109-121.

³ We have included in this article a part of our research contained in: Pr. ADRIAN BOLDIȘOR, *Ortodoxia ieri, azi, mâine. Teme intercreștine și interreligioase pentru secolul XXI*, Ed. Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2019, pp. 6-23. A Romanian version of this study was published in the journal *Mitropolia Olteniei*, no. 9-12/2020, pp. 70-84.

⁴ DIANA L. ECK, “The Christian Churches and the Plurality of Religious Communities”, in: *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World. An Ecumenical Conversation*, Edited by Emmanuel Clapsis, WCC Publications, Geneva. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, Massachusetts, 2004, p. 12.

***The Clash of Civilizations* – a controversial book**

In 1993, Samuel Huntington published the article “The Clash of Civilizations?” in the journal *Foreign Affairs*,⁵ igniting intense discussions. Later, the American political scientist noted regarding the echoes generated by this publication: “People were variously impressed, intrigued, outraged, frightened, and perplexed by my argument that the central and most dangerous dimension of the emerging global politics would be conflict between groups from differing civilizations. Whatever else it did, the article struck a nerve in people of every civilization”.⁶

Three years later, in 1996, the author published the famous book that excluded the question mark from the title, adding a subtitle “Remarking of World Order”: *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remarking of World Order*. The book, translated into several languages and which became a bestseller, provoked even more heated controversies, starting from the central theme: the future of peace and the world in general depends on the cooperation between political, spiritual, and intellectual leaders belonging to the major world civilizations. “In the clash of civilizations, Europe and America will hang together or hang separately. In the greater clash, the global ‘real clash’, between Civilization and barbarism, the world’s great civilizations, with their rich accomplishments in religion, art, literature, philosophy, science, technology, morality, and compassion, will also hang together or hang separately. In the emerging era, clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world war”.⁷

In his analysis, Huntington considered the fall of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe and the end of the Cold War, events that led to significant changes among many peoples. In this context, policies were changing across all cultural areas, such that “flags count and so do other symbols of cultural identity, including crosses, crescents, and even head coverings, because culture counts, and cultural identity is what is most meaningful to most people. People are discovering new but often old identities and marching under new but often old flags which lead to wars with new but often old enemies”.⁸ Those seeking their identities based on ethnic elements ended up

⁵ SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, in: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 72, No. 3, 1993, pp. 22-49.

⁶ SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996, p. 13.

⁷ IBIDEM, p. 321.

⁸ IBIDEM, p. 20.

confronting other peoples present in the lines that separate the major civilizations.

After the end of the Cold War, local politics is based on the politics of ethnicity, while global politics is grounded in the politics of civilizations. Thus, conflicts are not between different social classes, but between peoples belonging to the cultures of the world. The greatest conflicts arise along the fault lines between civilizations. After the end of the Cold War, culture gained a power that separates and unifies, depending on the context. Peoples with different ideologies come to unite through culture. "For forty-five years the Iron Curtain was the central dividing line in Europe. That line has moved several hundred miles east. It is now the line separating the peoples of Western Christianity, on the one hand, from Muslim and Orthodox peoples on the other".⁹

According to Huntington, the world in which we live is defined by eight major civilizations that interact based on the cultural models that characterize them: Sinic (Chinese civilization), Japanese, Hindu, Islamic, Orthodox, Western, Latin American, and possibly African. Today, states define themselves in terms of civilization, cooperating with states that have similar or common cultures, entering into conflict with those of different cultures. In this context, the history of humanity is a history of civilizations, and civilization is a cultural reality, even though there have been voices, especially in Germany, that have separated culture from civilization. Both civilization and culture generally refer to the way of life of people, with civilization being a large document of culture. "Of all the objective elements which define civilizations, however, the most important usually is religion, as the Athenians emphasized".¹⁰ A civilization is the broadest cultural entity, such that each civilization considers itself the center of the world, its history equating with the history of mankind. "This has been perhaps even more true of the West than of other cultures. Such monocivilizational viewpoints, however, have decreasing relevance and usefulness in a multicivilizational world. Scholars of civilizations have long recognized this truism".¹¹

The expression "universal civilization" primarily refers to the Western world. One of the important arguments indicating the birth of a civilization is the process of modernization that began in the 18th century

⁹ IBIDEM, p. 28.

¹⁰ IBIDEM, p. 42.

¹¹ IBIDEM, p. 55.

and is characterized by industrialization, urbanization, literacy, education, wealth, social mobilization, and complex and diversified occupational structures. However, it would be a mistake to identify modern civilization with the Western one and vice versa, because the main characteristics of the West that distinguish it from other civilizations (the classical heritage, Catholicism and Protestantism, European languages, the separation of spiritual and temporal authorities, the supremacy of the rule of law, social pluralism, representative communities, individualism) predate its modernization. None of these factors was specific only to the West, but their combination gave it its specific quality. "These concepts, practices, and institutions simply have been more prevalent in the West than in other civilizations. They form at least part of the essential continuing core of Western civilization. They are what is Western but not modern about the West. They are also in large part the factors which enabled the West to take the lead in modernizing itself and the world".¹² The reactions against Westernization did not take long to emerge, and over time, there have been non-Western societies that modernized without abandoning their own culture and indigenous traditions, even though they widely adopted Western values, institutions, and practices. In outlining the relationship between Orthodoxy and the Western world, Samuel Huntington emphasized the idea that Orthodox nations are not part of Western civilization. Based on the fact that political and economic differences between civilizations have their roots in their differing cultures, the Orthodox world is closer to the Muslim world.

In the first half of the 20th century, it was increasingly asserted that modernization would lead to the disappearance of religion as a significant element of human existence. In the second half of the same century, it became evident that, although modernization spread globally, there was a global religious revival, called "*la revanche de Dieu*". The main cause of this resurgence was, surprisingly, modernization itself. Thus, religious revival is a reaction both against modern secularism and moral relativism. It is, at the same time, a reaffirmation of the values of order, discipline, labor, and solidarity. Various religious groups take responsibility for social needs often ignored by the state, whether in healthcare, education, or aiding the population in difficult economic situations. "The breakdown of order and of civil society creates vacuums which are filled by religious, often fundamentalist, groups. If traditionally dominant religions do not meet the

¹² IBIDEM, p. 72.

emotional and social needs of the uprooted, other religious groups move in to do so and in the process greatly expand their memberships and the saliency of religion in social and political life”.¹³ Indigenization and the religious revival are global phenomena, while contemporary religious revival movements are anti-secular, anti-universal, and, if not Christian, anti-Western, opposing modernism.

In the new global order that has emerged, the core states of the major civilizations have replaced the two powers of the Cold War, the U.S. and Russia, which were the main poles of attraction for other countries, bringing about significant changes especially in the Western, Orthodox, and Sinic civilizations.

Regarding Europe, discussions have long centered on identifying and defining the borders of the continent, especially in the East, starting with the desire and necessity of integrating certain states into the EU and NATO. One of the best-known cases is the one that has separated the Western world from the Muslim world for centuries and, as the author adds, also from the Orthodox world. The beginning of this division coincides with the division of the ancient Roman Empire in the 4th century and the formation of the Holy Roman Empire in the 10th century, a reality that remained unchanged for centuries. “Beginning in the north, it runs along what are now the borders between Finland and Russia and the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) and Russia, through western Belarus, through Ukraine separating the Uniate west from the Orthodox east, through Romania between Transylvania with its Catholic Hungarian population and the rest of the country, and through the former Yugoslavia along the border separating Slovenia and Croatia from the other republics. In the Balkans, of course, this line coincides with the historical division between the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. It is the cultural border of Europe, and in the post-Cold War world it is also the political and economic border of Europe and the West. The civilizational paradigm thus provides a clear-cut and compelling answer to the question confronting West Europeans: Where does Europe end? Europe ends where Western Christianity ends and Islam and Orthodoxy begin. This is the answer which West Europeans want to hear, which they overwhelmingly support sotto voce, and which various intellectuals and political leaders have explicitly endorsed”.¹⁴

¹³ IBIDEM, p. 98.

¹⁴ IBIDEM, p. 158.

Within this interpretation, Central Europe includes the territories of the former Habsburg Empire, Poland, and eastern Germany, while Eastern Europe includes the regions developed under the auspices of the Orthodox Church: Bulgaria and Romania, towards the Black Sea, and the European parts of the former Soviet Union. The separation can also be seen in the way central countries progressed compared to eastern ones after the fall of the communist bloc, reaching a line that separates Catholic and Protestant areas from Orthodox ones, thus creating a true cultural fault line. This criterion also became one for integration into European structures, and in 1996, Huntington gave Romania and Bulgaria little chance of becoming full EU members compared to Central European countries. The same criteria also played a role in the admission of countries into NATO.¹⁵ However, there are two exceptions in this scheme: Greece, a non-Western country (“is also an anomaly, the Orthodox outsider in Western organizations”),¹⁶ and Turkey, a Muslim country.

Russia represents a special case, difficult to place within a specific structure. Similarly, many countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union, such as Ukraine, were also hard to categorize. “The Russian-Ukrainian relationship is to eastern Europe, John Morrison has pointed out, what the Franco-German relationship is to western Europe. Just as the latter provides the core of the European Union, the former is the core essential to unity in the Orthodox world”.¹⁷

Huntington saw future relations between states and groups belonging to different civilizations as antagonistic, leading to wars. The most violent fault lines are between the followers of Islam and their Orthodox, Hindu, African, and Western Christian neighbors at the “micro” level, and at the “macro” level between Muslim and Asian societies, on the one hand, and the West, on the other. “The dangerous clashes of the future are likely to arise from the interaction of Western arrogance, Islamic intolerance, and

¹⁵ Regarding Romania and Bulgaria, in terms of their accession to the EU and NATO, the historical realities were entirely different from those presented by Huntington in 1996. Thus, the two countries joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007.

¹⁶ IBIDEM, p. 162.

¹⁷ SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, p. 168. This statement of Huntington’s should also be analyzed in light of the latest events related to the war between Russia and Ukraine.

Sinic assertiveness”.¹⁸ Ultimately, “civilizations are the ultimate human tribes, and the clash of civilizations is tribal conflict on a global scale”.¹⁹

Several Western researchers have tried to argue that the West should not have problems with Islam, but only with violent extremist Islamists. “Fourteen hundred years of history demonstrate otherwise. The relations between Islam and Christianity, both Orthodox and Western, have often been stormy. Each has been the other’s Other”.²⁰ Islam is the only civilization that has dangerously threatened and questioned the supremacy of the West at least twice: in 1453 (the fall of Constantinople) and in 1529 (the siege of Vienna). The causes of the conflicts between Christians and Muslims are not to be found in the Crusades of the 12th century nor in 20th century Muslim fundamentalism, but rather “in the nature of the two religions and the civilizations based on them”.²¹ On the one hand, the conflict was provoked by differences between the two religions (the relationship between religion and politics), and on the other hand, by the similarities between them (both are monotheistic, universal, missionary religions). “The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power”.²²

A significant case supporting Huntington’s thesis is the conflict in Bosnia, which was truly a war of civilizations. The main participants belonged to different civilizations and religions, and according to the pattern of this civilizational divide, other countries from around the world also became involved. “Muslim states and organizations universally rallied behind the Bosnian Muslims and opposed the Croats and Serbs. Orthodox countries and organizations universally backed the Serbs and opposed the Croats and Muslims. Western governments and elites backed the Croats, castigated the Serbs, and were generally indifferent to or fearful of the Muslims. As the war continued, the hatreds and cleavages among the groups deepened and their religious and civilizational identities intensified, most notably among the Muslims. Overall the lessons of the Bosnian war are, first, primary participants in fault line wars can count on receiving help, which may be substantial, from their civilizational kin; second, such help

¹⁸ IBIDEM, p. 183.

¹⁹ IBIDEM, p. 207.

²⁰ IBIDEM, p. 209.

²¹ IBIDEM, p. 210.

²² IBIDEM, p. 217.

can significantly affect the course of the war; and third, governments and people of one civilization do not expend blood or treasure to help people of another civilization fight a fault line war”.²³

“The Clash of Civilizations” between acceptance and rejection. The Orthodox position

The September 11, 2001, attack seemed to some – and continues to seem to this day – like an image of the confrontation between fundamentalist Muslim militants and the Western culture rooted in Christianity, with the most commonly used words in those days and the days that followed being “jihad” and “crusade”. At the same time, the attack was perceived as a validation of “the clash of civilizations” thesis put forward by Huntington just a few years earlier. From that moment, religion became a topic of discussion at most international meetings, regardless of the subject being addressed. The world began to think more and more about the issue of violence, which represents a dark stain on the image of recent history. “Confronted with these developments, many political and economic actors on the global scene have begun to look for help in managing the dangerous dynamic of violence with seems to have been unleashed. These are increasing appeals to religious communities and their leaders for public initiatives of moderation, moral orientation and reconciliation”.²⁴

In these conditions, the ideas contained in Huntington’s book sparked intense debates globally. Even the author was surprised by how his arguments were either supported or attacked. The paradox emerged when those who found themselves “photographed” in Huntington’s theory turned against it. There were also some authors who believed that these ideas needed to be examined and action taken so that the theory would not become a reality.

The American political scientist was concerned with finding arguments to support current realities and achievements against the forms that threaten them, which are incompatible with them. Those who viewed the challenge positively proposed the solution of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, emphasizing that the modern multicultural and multireligious reality does not exclude anyone who wishes to manifest their own way of life. Human rights and respect for others are values of the

²³ IBIDEM, p. 289.

²⁴ KONRAD RAISER, “Violence and Religion in Pluralistic Societies”, in: *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World. An Ecumenical Conversation*, pp. 90-91.

modern world, allowing people to express themselves in the way they choose or think. Ultimately, the theory proposed by Huntington did not lead to self-criticism, but rather to apologetic, sometimes aggressive, arguments.

One of the criticisms of this theory was that it ignores the possibilities of reconciliation, which is primarily based on Christian forgiveness. Forgiveness and reconciliation are the two elements that Christianity particularly emphasizes in the process of promoting peace between people, regardless of the religion to which they belong. In addressing this issue, one must start from the reality of the human being as a personal being who opens up to his fellow creatures, who are also created in the image of God. Forgiveness and reconciliation are grounded in the anthropological teaching regarding the creation of man in the image of God and the salvation of all in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God. Thus, all things are renewed in the Church, the Mystical Body of the Lord.²⁵ The Church occupies an important place in building a strong society, a role given to it by God, as it is the place where all those who manifest this desire are expected and received.

In a study about the role of the Church in the post-communist world, Christos Yannaras contrasted the role of the Christian Church with the concrete realities of this world. Thus, the Church must respond to the deepest human need, with the transcendence of death being the only thing that opposes the consumerism typical of modern society. “A common understanding of the Church’s role in the postcommunist world requires criteria that allow us to discern the reality of the Church empirically and distinguish it from imitations”.²⁶ In order to recognize ecclesiastical authenticity, two criteria must be considered: the proclamation of victory over death and the institutional framework that ensures the unity and continuity of ecclesiastical authenticity in history, namely the apostolic succession. The empirical reality of the nature of the Church is encompassed in each human person who is in relationship with others.

An analysis of the current Western world highlights the fact that “modern Marxist or capitalist historical materialism is an intrinsic product of the development of the metaphysical revolution of the Enlightenment –

²⁵ RODNEY L. PETERSEN, “Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Christian Theology. A Public Role for the Church in Civil Society”, in: *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World. An Ecumenical Conversation*, pp. 110-129.

²⁶ CHRISTOS YANNARAS, “The Church in the Postcommunist World”, in: *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 3:1, 2003, p. 32.

and of the new civilization it founded”.²⁷ In his book, Samuel Huntington started from two European civilizations, which he presented as already formed, both with religious bases and with evident rivalries that were first observed in the accumulated differences over time: on the one hand, societies embodied by the Catholic and Protestant religious traditions, and, on the other hand, societies belonging to Orthodox Christianity and Islam. However, in his approach, the author ignored many specific realities of Europe. He described the Orthodox and Islamic civilizations as true threats to Western civilization, incapable of assimilating the achievements of Western modernity: the absolute priority of individual rights, political liberalism, and the exclusive engagement of functional rationalism to increase productivity. “It is quite clear that Huntington’s criteria of cultural difference among Europe’s religious traditions are the result of Europe’s anti-religious rebellion. Individual rights, political liberalism, utilitarian rationalism, economic development, and progress are the most representative results of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and are products of modern Europe’s zealous insistence on naturalism (physiocracy) as a substitute for Christian ontology, cosmology and anthropology”.²⁸ Thus, the American political scientist emphasized and imposed historical materialism as his own criterion for determining the cultural differences represented by the rival European religious traditions. “Thus Huntington, unintentionally and even unconsciously, is right: whether we speak of the cultural ‘rivalry’ between Catholicism/Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy, or between historical materialism and the Church, we are referring to the same socio-historical reality”.²⁹

In Huntington’s analysis, we must also consider the reality that today’s West is characterized by the supremacy of metaphysical nihilism and historical materialism. In this context, the differences – rather than the rivalries – between the Western and Orthodox traditions stem from two different paradigms that define them. The “inability” of Orthodoxy to assimilate the Western cultural paradigm does not constitute a rivalry, as Orthodoxy prioritizes promoting interpersonal relationships over the emphasis placed in the Western world on individual discipline. The American political scientist condemned Orthodox-based societies for being unable to assimilate the principles of human rights protection and for being

²⁷ IBIDEM, p. 36.

²⁸ IBIDEM, pp. 36-37.

²⁹ IBIDEM, p. 37.

unable to adapt to a pluralistic world. Indeed, Orthodoxy opposes the idea that the entire collectivity means society as the sum of individuals. It is not an arithmetic sum that ignores human existence. The history of Orthodoxy records the respect for human rights within its tradition. However, it cannot agree with the way human rights are viewed in our times, because this modern paradigm is based on human egocentrism. “A communion-centred version, based on the protection of human existential truth and authenticity might bear the arrival of a new cultural ‘paradigm’”.³⁰

Today’s reality shows that the role of Christian denominations in the post-communist world is marginal, with religious life being confined to private life, characterized by individualism. Today, the cultural crisis is deepening and can only be overcome through communal relationships between people. There must be intense cooperation to remove the danger of individualism, which causes the loss of human quality. People must reintegrate into the communal life of the parish, thus allowing the past to regain its living character for any new personal reality, since ecclesial life offers personal communion.

In an analysis of the place of Orthodoxy in the contemporary Western world, Metropolitan John Zizioulas emphasized the importance of being aware that much of the world is dominated by Western culture and civilization, present in all areas of human life. The political and economic superiority of Western countries has made them models for other countries in the world. In the current context, Orthodoxy must present its ethos, not transform into an “exotic” religion that adjusts to the needs of small communities. The spread of Orthodox Christians in the Western world occurred mainly after the Russian Revolution and after the two World Wars. Today, there is a large number of Orthodox Christians living in the West, which implies an increasing responsibility for the Orthodox Church. At the same time, the idea must be strengthened that Orthodox mission in the Western world goes beyond simple proselytism. In this regard, Orthodoxy must define its role and place in today’s world, which encompasses all

³⁰ IDEM, “Human Right and the Orthodox Church”, in: *The Orthodox Churches in the Pluralistic World. An Ecumenical Conversation*, p. 89. See the Orthodox position on human rights: Rev. Lecturer IONIȚA APOSTOACHE, PhD, “About the Crete Council Document: ‘Mission of the Church in Today’s World’”. Orthodox Considerations on the ‘Dignity of Human Person’”, in: *Orthodox Theology in Dialogue (OTD)*, No. 4/2018, pp. 155-177. On human rights seen from an interreligious perspective, see: ADRIAN BOLDIȘOR, “Human Rights in Orthodoxy and Islam. A Comparative Approach”, in: *Review of Ecumenical Studies (RES)*, vol. 7, issue 1, 2015, pp. 116-133.

people and the entire cosmos. The role of Orthodoxy in Europe and the world is much more important than reducing the mission of the Church to converting as many people as possible.

Orthodoxy must present its ethos in relation to Western cultural and religious values. Orthodox Christians living in territories other than those where they were born can and must interpret and present to the world what they understand by the terms “Western” and “Occidental” and build bridges between Orthodox faith and Western culture. They must follow the example of the Holy Fathers of the Church, who took into account the cultural challenges of their time and succeeded in transforming the Greco-Roman world according to the evangelical teaching. Orthodoxy in the West is called to do exactly the same thing for the present time: to address and solve the current needs of people based on its own religious tradition. These problems become the problems of everyone, regardless of where they live or where they come from.

The greatest questions arise when the fear of the other is identified with the fear of otherness, which is, in fact, an overlap of difference and division. In such circumstances, human existences are identified with the divisions between them, giving rise to all sorts of separations: states, clubs, fraternities, or confessions. “When difference becomes division, communion is nothing but an arrangement for peaceful co-existence”.³¹ It becomes a partial interest that can turn into conflict, starting from the confusion made between differences and divisions.

Based on the example of the Holy Fathers, one can speak of the cosmic dimension of reality. The cosmos is divided into various parts, as a result of the appearance of death due to ancestral sin. “Death exists because communion and otherness cannot coincide in creation. The different beings become distant beings: because difference becomes division, distinction becomes distance”.³² According to the teaching of Saint Maximus the Confessor, the difference must be maintained. However, division represents the perversion of difference and, in the end, leads to death. By combining difference and division, one reaches death; therefore, hell is seen as the ultimate isolation from the other. “We cannot solve this problem through ethics. We need a new birth. This leads us to ecclesiology”.³³

³¹ Metropolitan JOHN ZIZIOULAS, “Communion and Otherness”, in: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 38, no. 4 (1994), p. 350.

³² IBIDEM, pp. 350-351.

³³ IBIDEM, p. 351.

The discussion about the Church and her role in contemporary society becomes essential. The Church, the mystical Body of the Lord Jesus Christ, lives in history, in the world after the fall into sin. "All our observations concerning the difficulty in reconciling communion with otherness in our culture are applicable also to the life of the Church. Sin as fear and rejection of the other is a reality experienced also within the Church. The Church is made of sinners, and she shares fully the ontological and cosmic dimension of sin which is death, the break of communion and final *diastasis* (separation and decomposition) of beings".³⁴ For Orthodox Christians, the main characteristic of the Church remains *metanoia*, the change of mind through repentance. Orthodox ecclesiology, starting from the holiness of the Church, should not lead to triumphalism but to deep compassion and *metanoia*. In today's confession, Orthodoxy must speak about the truths it has preached since the apostolic era: faith in the Holy Trinity (the quintessential model of interpersonal communion), faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (people are created in the image of God and are called to become like Him in Christ, the Son of God incarnate, the Image of the Heavenly Father), faith in the Holy Spirit (He Who brings about *koinonia*, supreme communion), the teaching about the Church (the mystical Body of the Lord through which the bond between people and God is restored through the Holy Mysteries). All these form the foundation for the relationship between communion and otherness. In current discussions about the role of Orthodoxy in the West, one must start from the person and personalism, as understood from an Orthodox perspective: otherness in communion and communion in otherness, freedom and creativity simultaneously.

Nowadays, communion with others is quite difficult not only outside the Church but also within it. Orthodoxy offers answers to the current questions that gravitate around the relationship between communion and otherness, answers that come from ecclesial life. These truths must be preached in the Western world, based on a certain way of life represented by authentic Orthodox existence. "Orthodoxy is present in Western Europe not in order to proselytize or to impress and 'charm' with its 'exotic' appearance. It is there as a seed to be planted in the soil of Western culture, as an integral and organic part of it, to assist Western Europe to acquire and

³⁴ IBIDEM. On the role of the Church in the contemporary world, see: †Dr. IRINEU POPA, Arhiepiscopul Craiovei și Mitropolitul Olteniei, *Biserica în actualitate sau actualitatea Bisericii*, Ed. Academiei Române, București, 2018

live communion with the other in a personal way on the basis of the Trinitarian, the Christological and the eucharistic vision of existence. This can only happen through a slow process, a 'kenotic' presence and a genuine integration. It can only happen in close and creative co-operation and truthful dialogue with Western Christianity and culture".³⁵

The Church is on its way to the Kingdom of God without identifying with it, in continuous transformative movement. "The Church, in its capacity as an eschatological and eucharistic community directed towards the future, does not acquire its foundation (ὑπόσταση) primarily from what it is or from what was transmitted to it in the past as a structure or as an institution, but especially from what will happen in the Eschaton. Therefore, on the one hand, the Church progressively becomes the Kingdom of God, while, on the other hand, the identification of the Church with the Kingdom of God not only objectifies the latter, but also transforms the Church into a frozen organism, a static form or institutional structure, an institution of history, into a closed composite system that absolutizes the significance of the past to the detriment of the future and the presence of the Holy Spirit".³⁶

Starting from these ecclesiological aspects, it must be emphasized that considering the cultures and civilizations of the East and West as unrelated or as incapable of converging in a creative way is a simplistic approach. Any generalization in history is simplistic, whether it supports or combats the theory of "the clash of civilizations". It is more important to analyze the possibilities for mutual enrichment between different cultures and civilizations than to focus on the potential clashes between them.³⁷ This can only be achieved in the Church, the mystical Body of the Lord, where all people are called, awaited, and incorporated, regardless of race, gender, or religion, if they respond positively to the calling of our Savior Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God for us men and for our salvation.

³⁵ IBIDEM, pp. 360-361.

³⁶ PANTELIS KALAITZIDIS, *Ortodoxie și modernitate. O introducere*, Traducere din neogreacă de Florin-Cătălin Ghiț, Prefață de Radu Preda, Ed. Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, pp. 31-32.

³⁷ His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW, *Encountering the Mystery. Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today*, Doubleday, New York, 2008, pp. 214-215.

Conclusions

In the globalized world³⁸ in which we live, characterized by the generalization of instability and uncertainty, the exclusion of religion from people's lives has led both to the resurgence of fundamentalisms, reaching even to local, national, and international religious conflicts, and to the opposite phenomenon of "the return to God". Some, among whom Samuel Huntington occupies a special place, have linked these realities to what has become known as "the clash of civilizations" and a real "war of religions". Others have seen religion as the only source that can promote peace and understanding between people. Thus, more and more is being said about a "return to religion", without, however, reaching syncretism or homogenizing the differences between religions. In this context, interreligious dialogue occupies an important place.³⁹

Dialogue is a gift from God. The Creator is constantly in dialogue with human beings created in His image. Dialogue is the fundamental experience of our lives and can only take place in an atmosphere of respect and responsibility, with the goal of mutual understanding and clarifying misunderstandings. It is important that participants in dialogue discern between historical context, particular traditions, and beliefs, and the ultimate truth. Heresy arises when only one side of the truth is selected and absolutized in a fundamentalist manner, thereby excluding other aspects. God's plan encompasses all people created out of love and never changes,

³⁸ Globalization is one of the most important elements that have led to the articulation of local nationalisms and national identities and, at the same time, to the emergence of local rivalries in Southeast Europe. It also led to the proliferation of nation-states as organizational models, a reality that does not imply uniformity in the formulation of national ideologies. The emergence of national states in Southeast Europe followed the Western model, ethnic conflicts being the consequence of this process, and not of what was understood by "the clash of civilizations" theory formulated by Samuel Huntington. (VICTOR ROUDOMETOF, "Nationalism, Globalization, Eastern Orthodoxy. 'Unthinking' the 'Clash of Civilization' in Southeastern Europe", in: *European Journal of Social Theory* 2 (2)/1999, pp. 233-234).

³⁹ See an analysis of interreligious dialogue in: ADRIAN BOLDIȘOR, *Importanța și actualitatea dialogului interreligios pentru lumea contemporană: istorie, perspective, soluții*, Ed. Mitropolia Olteniei, Craiova, 2015; Fr. PhD Associated Prof. ADRIAN BOLDIȘOR, "Reflections on the Mission of the Orthodox Church after the Holy and Great Council of Crete. Inter-Christian and Inter-religious Perspectives", in: *Orthodox Theology in Dialogue (OTD)*, no. 4/2018, pp. 118-154. On the role of Orthodoxy in current ecumenical discussions, see: DORU MARCU, "Orthodoxy and Ecumenical Dialogue after Crete Synod (2016) and Social Ethos Document (2020): History, Critical Positions and Reception", in: *Religions*, 14: 936, 2023, pp. 1-15.

although human beings and historical circumstances can change. “We are convinced that despite cultural, religious, and racial differences, we are closer to one another than we could ever imagine”.⁴⁰

The Orthodox Church has received the fullness of truth through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, a truth treasured and cultivated in the communion of the Saints. For people, knowing the divine truth is a gradual process in an endless development. Each person walks this path alongside others, but is not identical to them. Each person receives and perceives the truth in accordance with their own religious experience and capacity for understanding. The supreme truth exists and has been revealed in its entirety, present perfectly and unchanging in the Orthodox Church. However, the way it is perceived varies from person to person. “This is not a narrowly doctrinal vision of theological truth. However, it is an essentially spiritual vision for worldly reality, one that removes arrogance from authority and open new ways of approaching believers of other religions. It presupposes magnanimity and charity, faith and hope, tolerance and reconciliation. It opposes forceful conversion and conflict, imposition and intolerance, aggression and violence”.⁴¹ This approach protects us from attributing intentions and decisions to God that are solely ours. When dialoguing with those of other beliefs and ideologies, one must start from God’s sacrificial love for all people.

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⁴⁰ His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch BARTHOLOMEW, *Encountering the Mystery. Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today*, p. 221.

⁴¹ IBIDEM, p. 224.

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